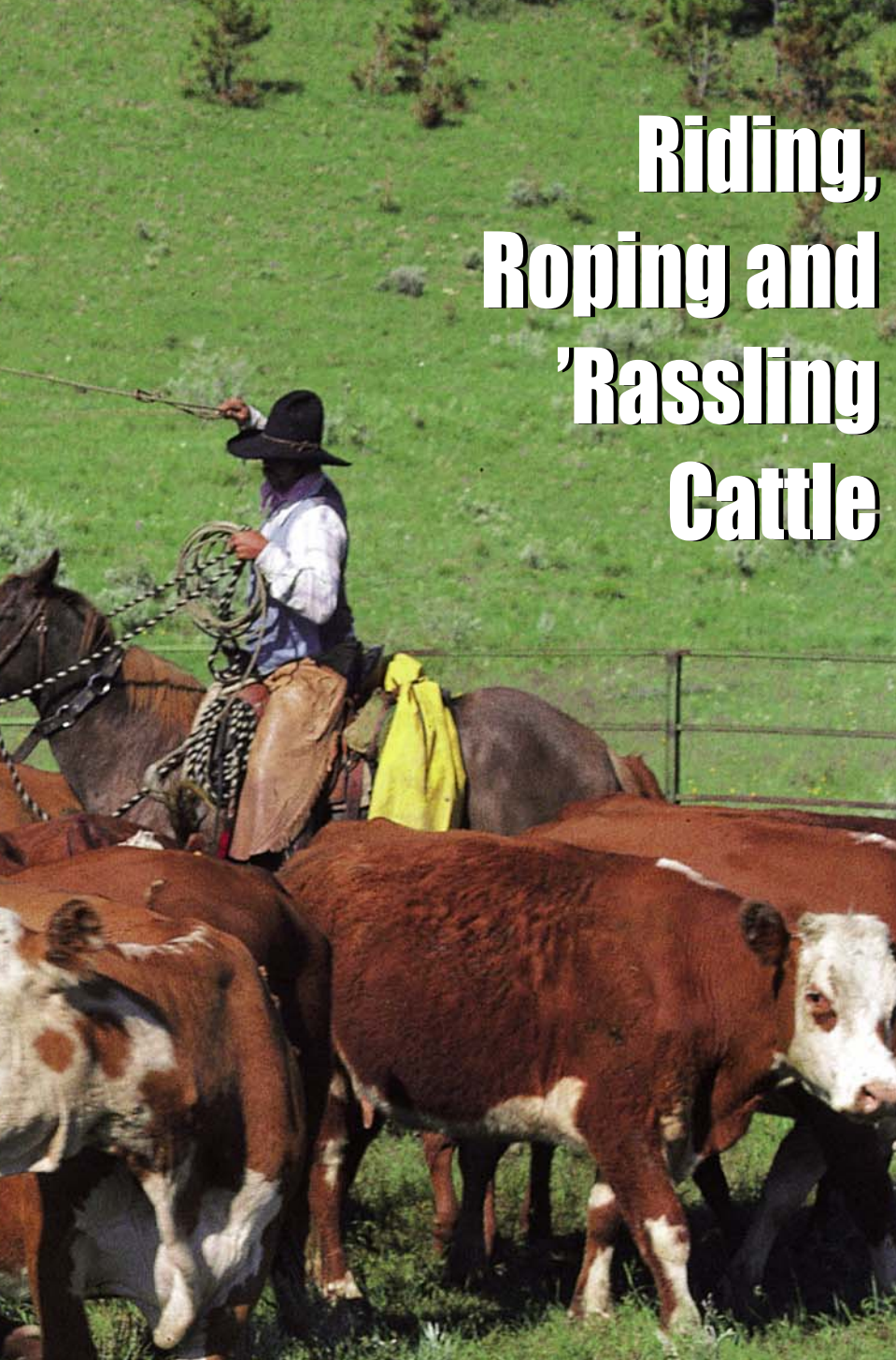


Living a Cowboy's Life

Text and photographs by DANIEL MILLER



Riding, Roping and 'Rassling Cattle



When we woke up, the pale purple sky glowed on the eastern horizon and the stars still sparkled, though they were fading fast as night turned to early dawn. The cook issued his breakfast holler: "Come and get it!" Soon after, the cool morning stillness was punctured by the slapping of saddle leather, the jingling of spurs, and the rhythmic beat of horses' hooves on the soft ground. Meadowlarks sang from the sagebrush, and from the cattails along the stream below the roundup camp, red-winged blackbirds were starting their morning chorus. Over the ridge, a pack of coyotes commenced their plaintive howling. The sun wasn't up yet, but the eastern Montana prairie was already coming alive as the roundup crew of cowboys rode out to begin the day's work. Getting up at 4 a.m. every morning to saddle a horse and trot off across the prairie is not everybody's idea of a good way to start the day, but for cowboys it is a part of the job they cherish.

The American cowboy remains a mythic icon for millions of people around the world. Their ideas are based mostly on "westerns," TV shows and movies made in

Cowboys round up cattle on Padlock Ranch in Montana (left). Although real cowboys still herd cattle on horseback, modern vehicles are also used (below).



Right: Inside the cook tent, showing the back of the chuck wagon where the roundup cook stores his supplies.

Below: A chuck wagon with supplies.

Hollywood about life in the Old West, when settlers established towns and set up ranches, farms and homesteads in the western part of North America during the latter half of the 19th century. The image of the cowboy was used to create one of the most successful corporate advertising campaigns ever, for Marlboro cigarettes. Levi's and Wrangler blue jeans are bought by urban consumers who have never been near a cow or horse, yet identify the clothes they wear with freedom and wide open spaces and the cowboy way of life. The cowboy may be the only profession that has inspired a writing genre, hundreds of movies and TV shows, a special type of music and a spectator sport—the rodeo.

Despite all of this interest and popularity, the actual life of the working cowboy remains woefully misunderstood. There is also a widespread, mistaken belief that real cowboys no longer exist, that all the work

of raising cattle is now done with pickup trucks, motorcycles and helicopters and that horses are no longer used to work cattle. The fact is that real, working cowboys still do exist throughout the American West, they ride horses, and they use the word “cowboy” as a verb as well as a noun.

For many years, I *cowboyed* on large cattle ranches in the state of Montana, in the western United States. I rode on roundups, where a horse-drawn chuck

wagon was still pulled out to make camp just like 100 years ago. In the winter, I fed hay to cows with a team of big, Belgian work horses pulling a sled. I also packed mules into the mountains along the Continental Divide for an outfitter who ran a “dude ranch.” A number of summers were spent on a “cow camp” where I took care of 1,500 cows and their calves spread out across more than 40,500 hectares. Those cattle were worth more than \$1.5





million and I was responsible for them, despite only being paid \$500 a month!

The work of a cowboy is regulated by the life cycle of cattle. Calving normally takes place in late winter and early spring, February through April. This is a time of many sleepless nights as cows have to be continually looked after in case they have trouble giving birth. First calf heifers (cows giving birth for the first time) require special care and are often separated from older cows so they can be observed more easily.

Summer roundup takes place in May and June when the cows and calves are gathered. The calves are then branded, vaccinated and de-horned.

Hay, to feed the cows in the winter, is cut and baled in the summer. In the fall, another roundup is undertaken to wean the calves so they can be shipped off to feedlots. Also, at this time, cows that are not pregnant are usually sold. By late November or early December, depending on snowfall, cowboys begin feeding the

cattle hay to keep them alive until spring grass appears on the plains.

Early summer roundups are the best part of the annual cycle of work. When I participated in six-week-long roundups on Tullock Creek in eastern Montana in the 1980s, one of the outfits I worked for was the Padlock Ranch. There we herded cows and branded calves the old-time cowboy way, pulling out a horse-drawn chuck wagon and making cowboys sleep in tents on the prairie. With more than



Top: Padlock Ranch roundup camp set up with bedwagon and tent for the cowboys to sleep in and the chuck wagon and cook tent. Wagons are pulled by horses and the tents are used much like they were by cowboys 100 years ago.

*Above: Cowboys are not embarrassed to confess that they talk to their horses.
Above right: Cowboys keep a sharp watch on the herd.*



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3,000 cows to gather, a roundup crew of 12 cowboys branded 100 to 200 calves a day. Each cowboy was provided four or five horses to ride, but had to have his own saddles and gear. During the roundup we might get a few days off when it rained, which provided an opportunity to go to town for a shower and a cold beer. The rest of the time we were out there with the cows ridin', ropin' 'n' 'rasslin', that is, "wrestling" the cattle.

Cowboying can be hard, dirty, often lonely, and sometimes, dangerous work. Branding calves on a roundup is an arduous task and requires multi-tasking. You have to be able to rope calves from a horse and wrestle them to the ground for branding.

Celsius is no fun no matter how you look at it. Life in a cow camp, with no electricity or running water and the nearest neighbor 16 kilometers away, means you spend lots of time talking to your horse.

When I *cowboyed*, wages were about \$500 a month and included room and board, but "room" was a tent pitched on the prairies and "board" was chuck wagon grub: lots of meat and potatoes, beans and bacon, washed down with strong coffee. These days, the cost of a new working saddle starts at about \$1,500 and it is hard to find a good pair of riding boots for less than \$200. You'll never get rich *cowboying*, but we are getting paid to do what a lot of people pay to do on holidays spent at "dude ranches."

bluffs along the Bighorn River and stretch across ponderosa pine-covered hills to the Little Wolf Mountains in the east along the Tongue River. It is some of the best grass country in North America. In late May, the higher elevation slopes near the headwaters of Tullock Creek will be plastered with the big, bright yellow flowers of arrowleaf balsamroot and the bright blue blossoms of lupine. Wild rose bushes are in bloom along with chokecherries, wafting their fresh fragrance as you ride past. The smell of crushed sagebrush mixed with horse sweat and saddle leather is like rare incense or a cowboy cologne. Being able to see the sunrise and sunset every day and to watch the stars come out at night is another simple pleasure.

Despite adaptations over time, many items used by cowboys today, such as chaps, saddles, spurs and bits, have their origins in Mexico in the 16th century when it was under Spanish rule.



From left to right: (1) A silver bit connects to the reins, allowing the rider to direct the horse. (2) A cowboy's saddle has attached bags for carrying food and water. (3) The foot must rest in the stirrup. This cowboy is wearing boots under his jeans and chaps, or

leather leggings, to protect the skin from rubbing and weather. (4) Shown here is a cowboy boot with a spur at the back, used to make the horse go faster in an emergency. (5) A bedwagon for carrying cowboys' bedrolls has a horse harness hanging on it.

When a cowboy messes up, his pride can be hurt by ridicule from other crew members, or worse, he can be seriously injured by a bucking horse or a kicking calf. Feeding hay all day long in the winter in a blizzard when it is minus 28 degrees

There are also a lot of other benefits that come with the job that I can't put an economic value on. The country in eastern Montana where I worked on roundups is the kind cowboys dream about: wide open, rolling grasslands that rise up out of the

And any cowboy who is observant (most are) will notice unique things about the animals he works with, such as "baby-sitter cows" that look after a group of young calves as their mothers trail down to water a mile or more away. Only after



Horses are rounded up so cowboys can select the next day's mounts. Each cowboy alternates among four to five horses to give them a rest.


those cows come back will the babysitter go down to drink.

Roundups are a time to discuss with other cowboys the different ranches and how they operate, to observe the various saddles and tack and talk about their merits. There is also the quiet contentment that can come with being told by the boss that you did a good job roping, or overhearing fellow cowboys say, "He's a good hand." That's about the best compliment a cowboy could hope for. There is also the satisfaction that comes when you help out neighboring ranches, maintaining the spirit of rural ranching communities working together and those altruistic values that helped define the cowboy in American culture.

This past summer, while on home leave after working in Afghanistan for two years, I visited a friend I had *cowboyed* with over 20 years ago on the Padlock Ranch. David Workman, the son of the cow boss who ran the roundup wagon, was in college then, studying ani-

mal science at Montana State University, but went out on roundups with me. Now, he is managing a large ranch north of Roundup, Montana. As I drove along the gravel road up Flat Willow Creek and entered the property he was managing, I noticed that the fences were new and well built and that the rangelands were in good condition; little indicators that the ranch was well-managed. As he drove me around the ranch in a pickup truck, showing me new solar powered pumps he had installed in wells to provide water to the cattle, and activities to eliminate troublesome weeds in the pastures, our conversation focused on strategies he was working on to improve the rangeland and increase economic efficiency in his operations. Ranch managers these days not only have to be able to take care of cows, but

they must be business-minded and as comfortable working with Excel spreadsheets as they are with a rope.

Still, as the sun set over the prairie, what David and I talked about were the horses we had known and the cowboys we had worked with. 

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